WHO SHALL OWN THE SCHOOLS?

"Get an education, but don't change; go out into the larger world, but don't become a part of it." One can well imagine that this must be the sentiment of many a Micronesian parent as he sends his son or daughter off to school. He looks forward to the day when his child will return, well-versed in the necessary survival skills for a life of gainful wage employment, to take up his rightful position in the community. Apart from some incidental changes, he expects back basically the same young man or woman that he sent.

But in office buildings somewhere sit the men who financed and designed the network of village and district-center schools in Micronesia. They know well how fatuous the parent's pious hope for his child really is. As educational planners, they know that change is not incidental to the educational system in a developing country; it is its raison d'etre. Education has always been one of the most effective means whereby the "crust of custom" can be broken so that new attitudes, more favorable to development, might be engendered in a society. Schools, for instance, are supposed to teach children to save money and time, to work hard, to want better sanitation and housing, and to eat a balanced diet, among other things. For those committed to development, education is a powerful vehicle of social change.

It would be a grave mistake to impute malicious motives to those who have designed and those of us who have administered the educational system. If the school is intended to subvert certain traditional aspects of the society, it is only because these are seen as retarding economic and social development. The school is the incubator of new attitudes and values, among them a taste for material progress and the blessings it confers. If it breeds dissatisfaction among the young with the present style of life, the hope is that the products of the schools will be spurred on by their loftier expectations to foment change in their own society. The newly educated are to become a fifth column working from within their culture to revolutionize it according to the norms they have internalized through their education. Why else do so many development-minded planners insist that education be made a top priority in emerging nations?

The average parent, of course, knows nothing of these revolutionary designs as he sends his child off to school. Otherwise, he might never do so! Although he

anticipates some peripheral effects of education in his son or daughter, the father assumes that his children's education will be fundamentally compatible with the life-goals of his people. While he is aware that the school is a foreign-born institution, he sees it as transmitting knowledge and skills that can be assimilated into the traditional patterns of life in his culture. After completion of his schooling, his child, enriched with the valuable information that the wealthy nations of the world have to offer, will probably take a job and carry on life as usual. Very rarely does he suspect the deep conflict between value systems that the years of schooling will precipitate for his child.

Here, then, lies the problem. The parent has bargained for a cow and been given a horse. While he expects the school to turn out for him a skilled but docile wage-earner, it actually produces something quite different. He looks to the school as somehow preservative of society's traditional values and goals, but it is in fact designed to supplant many of these with others more suitable for modernization.

To be sure, both the parent and the educational planner see education as a means of liberation. For the parent, school is a way of freeing his child from the material hardships of a life tied to the land. Through schooling and the job that is sure to follow, the parent knows that the young can make for themselves better lives than he himself has had. Material comforts, improved status, and security are as much what the parent desires for his child here in Micronesia as anywhere else. Hence the popular groundswell for more and better education.

The educational planner, however, looks beyond this to its more far-reaching effects. He understands that as the school loosens the bonds of the conventionalism that governs the life of a rural people, it magnifies the tension between the individual and society. This is calculated; for unless the school system can produce persons who are capable of challenging the present social order and its givens, real development will never take place. The student must resist the prevailing spirit of acceptance of the status quo—"This is just the way things are and they can't be changed!"—or else the school has failed in one of its major goals. Yet it is precisely here that one of the major points of misunderstanding between the parent and the educator occurs. The former seems to think that young people will return from school prepared to spearhead technological changes that will improve the material standard of living without shaking the social order. His children may build

better houses, but they will not alter the rules of the household. The educator knows better, though. He anticipates the question that the young educated man is sure to ask: "If we can build tilt-up cement houses to replace our thatched huts, why can't we also replace traditional patterns of behavior? Why should I kiss my grandfather's hand, or wait until the age of forty to speak my thoughts?" In fact, it is only when he hears the young ask questions such as these that the educator knows that the process has had its desired effect and true liberation has begun.

It is difficult to quarrel with the goals of an educational system that proposes to release the creative energies of the young so that they can better their society. Freedom from ignorance, fear, and blind submission to the natural order is unquestionably a worthy end. All of this, of course, implies individual and societal change that tends to catalyze still further changes. But the point is not whether education should change people; good education cannot help doing so. The question is rather who shall assume control over the direction and pace of change. Does this responsibility belong to the educational planner alone who foresees some of the consequences of schooling that are presently hidden from the adult in the village? Or, does it belong to the unsophisticated parent as well?

If the parent shares in this responsibility, then he must no longer be permitted to send his children off to school with the vain hope that they will somehow be shielded from the power of the school to transform idnividuals. He must be plainly made aware of what changes are likely to be worked in his children, and through them his society, via the school. The expectations that the average Micronesian adult has of school are simply unreasonable. If he is not disabused of them immediately, he shall remain a helpless witness to, rather than a participant in, the forces of change in his society. Education will then continue to operate as a fifth column, covertly eroding the social values and institutions that the villager naively regards as secure.

Within the last two or three years educators in the Trust Territory have shown praiseworthy concern to involve members of the community in future educational planning. The man in the village (if he can be reached for comment) has been asked to participate in drawing up goals for use in the community's schools. As often as not, he has begged that educational adminstrators themselves settle these questions, excusing himself with a plea of ignorance as to how this

mysterious and alien system operates. The educator will not be put off, however, and returns with the request: "At least tell us what subjects you think should be taught in your school." The villager then usually proceeds to set down a list of courses that better suits the educational needs of American society fifty years ago than of present-day Micronesia--world history, chemistry, spelling, etc. This, of course, is easy to understand. The man in the village wants to preserve to the last detail the kind of school that has made it possible for Americans to buy the watches and refrigerators they possess. In those rare cases where he does suggest a curriculum better adapted to the needs of Micronesian society today, and amends the list to include local cultural studies, handicraft-carving and the like, educators count this as a major victory: the ordinary citizen has had his say and has altered the school to fit the local community.

In fact, though, he has not. He has completely failed to understand how the school really brings about change. He still shares the erroneous, though almost universally held belief that the school's greatest impact upon the young is through what it purports to teach, that is, its curriculum. He still thinks of the school as simply a place where people are trained in certain skills. This means that if some defect is found in the product (the child) at the end of the schooling process, the problem can be solved by merely substituting new skills until one finds the right combination. If the graduate is not able to participate in the productive activities of his community at the end of his education, we have only to replace a few of the academic subjects with fishing and agriculture in order to eliminate this difficulty.

This simplistic notion does not take account of the fact that most of the important things a child learns at school are not the result of what he studies, but the overall effect of the schooling process on him. In other words, a student is affected not so much by <u>what</u> he learns at school as <u>how</u> he learns. It is this process, with its latent value assumptions and goals, that is commonly called the "hidden curriculum" of the school. Throughout his eight, twelve or sixteen years of schooling, these assumptions and goals are continually working on the student to produce a series of changes in his values and world-view that go far beyond the subject matter of his courses.

Let me illustrate! From practically his first day in school, the student learns that he is a member of a favored group entitled to privileges from which

non-students are excluded. He is fed through the free-lunch program, exempted from family duties that he would otherwise be expected to perform, and in some places provided with free transportation to and from school. In short, his attendance at school allows him to look to others for support. If a water tank springs a leak or a classroom shutter needs repair, he waits for Public Works to fix it. Later on, especially in high school, he will turn towards his parents (often unemployed) for the cash he needs to outfit himself in the flared jeans, boots, and tank-top shirt that is de rigeur on many campuses.

Decked out in this dress and his eyes opened now to the wonders of the Sears catalogue, our young student becomes a bona fide member of the Cult of C.O.D. His first lesson in school is how many of this world's goods he cannot do without; the second is how to fill out a mailhouse order blank. As he continues with his education, his tastes will become more sophisticated—and more expensive. Educated young people like himself cannot be expected to walk; he must have a scooter or a car. Young people today cannot make do with a twenty-dollar guitar; he must have an amplifier and the other electrical apparatus to really enjoy himself. He has learned to become a consumer, often beyond his and his family's means.

It does not take long for him to appreciate the fact that society is divided into two groups: those who have their diplomas and those who do not. The former can look forward to a good salary, (he believes), and the social status and life-style that are concomitant with this. As for the latter, few are employed at all; and if they do work for a salary, it is as manual laborers. This distinction is driven home to him several times a day as he listens to vacancy announcements over the radio that stipulate one seeking the position must possess a college degree (or more rarely, a high school diploma). High on the list of his own aspirations, of course, is a good-paying job after he finishes school so that he can maintain himself in the style that has grown so attractive to him throughout his high school and college years.

His parents may grieve at times over the lack of respect that he shows to older members of his family and community. But his air of superiority only stems from the new norms for status that he has gained during his years of education: "Blessed are the educated, for they shall inherit the earth." As adults have

relinquished their right to educate him and entrusted him instead to the care of the school, he has come to feel that the only type of education worthy of the name is that conducted in the school building. What he or others have learned from other sources is of dubious value at best.

Parents will also complain bitterly of the independent spirit that their children manifest after their education. They will wrongly blame this on the permissiveness of school authorities and teachers, as if stricter enforcement of school regulations would take care of everything. What they do not appreciate, however, is that the very purpose of the school is to create an independent thinker, a questioning individual, a critical spirit. Whenever a teacher encourages his students to express themselves in the classroom or in an assignment, he is working towards this end. Student governments, laboratory experiments, group discussions, whatever their shortcomings in practice, all have this as their ultimate goal. Even in classes that still adhere to the most authoritarian procedures, pressures are being brought to bear on teachers to adopt new methods that are more consonant with this goal. Student-oriented inquiry-type approaches are being introduced everywhere in the Trust Territory. There is simply a dynamism in education that moves in the direction of individual freedom. Such is the nature of the education beast.

Moreover, the majority of high school students are physically removed from their own community and transferred to other surroundings when they become boarding students. They are withdrawn from the supervision of those who would normally have exercised authority over them and deposited in a social 'no-man's-land.' There they are subject to the enormous peer influence of the hundreds of other boys and girls who board at the school, with a mere handful of adult overseers to maintain control. To expect socialization of the young to occur normally amid these circumstances, as it would have in the village, is to demand the impossible. For the school has become its own social system with its own rules.

With such forces operating on the aspirations, values, and self-concept of the young, it is not surprising that the parent's admonition to his child to "get an education, but don't change" goes unheeded. The educational institution at work on his children is far too powerful to permit the young to be untouched by the norms it inculcates.

Its revolutionary effects on society may very well be quite beneficial in the long run, but at present they are not at all understood by the Micronesian parent. No one has bothered to tell him that his counsel to his children is futile and why this is so. In the meantime, he can be heard blaming the lax standards of discipline in schools, poor social studies courses, provocative movies, Western dancing, long hair and miniskirts, and just about everything else for the transformation in the mores and value systems of the younger generation.

It is not my purpose here to turn around and make the school the scapegoat for all the less desirable symptoms of cultural change. We have too many scapegoats already. What we must do is communicate to the Micronesian parent a realistic picture of just what the school, as it presently exists in Micronesia, can and cannot be expected to do. If it functions as it should, for instance, it cannot produce young men and women who uncritically accept the traditional social institutions and authority systems. Neither will it turn out persons whose life goals are just what they would have been if they remained in the village to work on the land. Parents must somehow be made aware of what the educational planner already knows. It is only when they understand the schooling process and its effects, its social costs and gains, that the Micronesian community can decide whether and how the present educational system should be altered.

To do anything less is to deny Micronesian parents their rightful responsibility in helping to direct the course of change in their society. Schools would then remain monuments to modernization instead of becoming instruments of authentic development. While modernization connotes change, regardless of whether it is imposed from without or not, development always implies participation by the community in the processes of change. If the dream of the educational planners who laid the foundations for the school system in Micronesia—a dream of genuine development—is ever to be realized, the information gap between them and the people who send their children to these schools must be closed. Only then will the Micronesian adult cease to be a passive spectator to an educational process that he does not understand and therefore cannot control.